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THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF POTENCY: A SYNTHETIC PRESENTATION IN TERMS OF "ACTIVE" AND "PASSIVE"

SOMMARIUM. — *Sicut primarie dividitur ens in actuale et potenziale, sic radicalissime distinguitur ens potenziale in potentiam activam et potentiam passivam; in quas duas videntur possi reduci omnes modi potentialitatis qui tractantur apud S. Thomam. Quaedam autem « relativitas » invenitur in determinatione potentialitatum formae substantialis atque voluntatis humanae angelicaeque.*

In St. Thomas' formulation, the study of potency is one of the most important prerequisites to a study of being. And the reason for this is that the only being we have immediate experience of, is created being: and created being is necessarily *potential* being — i. e., in some way falling short of complete perfection, and of perfect actuality. To understand potency, therefore, is to understand the proper characteristic of created being. Even the "potency" of God is essentially related to our understanding of the potency of created being. God is "potential", i. e., the Omnipotent Creator, *quoad nos*, only because we are potential in respect to Him, i. e., created by Him. We are moved to posit the power and superiority of God as Creator, precisely because we perceive the contingent and dependent powers and capacities of creatures.¹ And so potency in God is neither an imperfection nor a limit, but rather the unlimited creative power of God's essence, i. e., its perfect actuality.

We arrive at the concept of the "potency" of God only through abstraction from the potencies of creatures. Indeed, we could know neither God nor His potency, unless we examine created beings and their potencies as a preliminary. And it follows from this that the "potency" in God is not predicated of Him as if in contradistinction to actuality: but only by way of eminence — i. e., in so far as he contains in a pre-eminent way all created (potential) perfections and potencies. God's potency, therefore, is a paradox: It is fully actual potency; and is, indeed, identical with His fully actual essence.² In creatures, on the hand, it is truly a "potential" potency.

In view of the importance of potency *in via inventionis* for the understanding of both created and uncreated being, we might say that the most important division of being is the division into actual and potential being. For this

¹ Cf. *I De Pot.*, q. 1, art. 1.

² Cf. *Ibid.*

division truly and radically sets off created from uncreated being. And it is only by the creation of complex being (i. e., being composed from potency and act) that *beings* have become multiplied, and hence divided. All the divisions and distinctions which we ascribe to being would be neither possible nor intelligible unless there were some primordial complexification of being.

Let us conduct our inquiry into St. Thomas' general doctrine on potency, by first highlighting the distinction between actual and potential being, and then considering potency in its role as a principle of being.

A. THE DISTINCTION OF ACTUAL FROM POTENTIAL BEING.

In the Aristotelian system, actual being, i. e., actual substance (*οὐσία*) must somehow be prior in the universe considered as a whole.³ St. Thomas agrees basically with this, but adds that God is substance by way of *eminence*. It would, indeed, be more accurate to say that God is a *supersubstance*, a hyperexistent, and that He contains the perfections of substantiality and esse in much the same way that man contains the perfections of plant life, i. e., in a pre-eminent way.⁴ To more clearly define what he means by the fully actual God who created all things, St. Thomas quotes from Chapter XI, 6, of the *De Divinis Nominibus* of Dionysius:

We cannot say that the per se existent who is the cause of all things is some substance, whether angelic or divine: but must rather aver that the principle and the substantial ground and the cause of all the things which have been created in nature is itself a veritable *supersubstantial* existent.⁵

St. Thomas, in commenting on this passage, concludes that this supersubstantial esse of God is *substance* only in the sense that it is as it were the exemplar or form of all other substantial forms.

It is perhaps even misleading for us to think of God as an essence or substance. For when we use such words we cannot help but visualize a receptacle or receptive potency. And there is nothing of receptivity in God. He is, indeed, unreceived esse, unreceptive essence. He is pure and simple and completely impassible: the final act, or actuation, to which all created passive potencies are somehow ultimately ordered.⁶

The created beings which are ordered to God in such manifold ways have one thing in common: They are all *potential* in some way, in that, although they already participate in a higher or inferior manner in the perfections of

³ Cf. *Metaph.* XII, 1 e 6 (1069 a, 107 b, 3-6).

⁴ Cf. *De Subst. Sep.*, XVII, 93. A problem of terminology enters in here. If we wish to attribute substantiality and existence to creatures, then we are constrained to say that God has something more than this. It, on the other hand, we say that God is being and substance, we must, to be consistent and philosophically exact, say that all creatures are only quasi-beings, quasi-substances (i. e. having such names only by way of analogy).

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*: "Non enim substantiam quamdam divinam aut angelicam esse dicimus per se esse quod est causa quod sint omnia; solum enim — quod sint ex natura omnia — ipsum esse supersubstantiale.... est principium et substantia et causa".

⁶ Cf. *In I Sent.*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1.

God, they are still intrinsically *ordered* either to further perfection, or to continual preservation in the perfection which they have.

Those beings which participate in the highest way in the actuality of God are the intellectual substances. These intellectual substance are subdivisible into: 1) those numerous incorporeal species which in popular terminology we designate as "angels," and which are complete substances in full possession of both themselves and their thought; and 2) the species of man, whose soul is an incomplete substance which will attain to the full possession of itself and of its thought only if and when it comes to a state of full self-comprehension in an immortal body, unsusceptible to further change or corruption.

There are also other beings which participate in a minimal way in the supersubstantial actuality of God; which – in metaphorical terms – "have a long way to go" in attaining to such actuality; but which can indeed advance towards human intellectual actuality according to a slow and ordered progression.⁷ And these are the essentially material beings: i. e., beings whose substance could not exist in any way without matter. The potentiality of such beings is a progression towards actuality, a progression which is never quite complete, but always moving, always becoming.⁸ And the potency of such material beings is called "prime matter," i. e., that first substratum which must be presupposed as a receptacle for all essentially material forms, and also for the incomplete substantial form of man, which depends *per accidens* on a body for its complete perfection.

B. POTENCY AS A PRINCIPLE OF BEING.

Potency, whether it be found in material or in spiritual beings, is essentially an *ordering* to act, a special finite mode or *participation* in the pure actuality of God. And, if we analyze the connotation of the word, "participation", we will see that is at the same time both an affirmation and a negation: an affirmation, is so far as it designates a certain degree of positive actuality which is possessed; but a negation, in so far as it implies that there is some chasm — be it relatively great or small — between the perfection of the participant and unparticipated act.

There is an evident, easily perceptible negation or privation implied in the "participation" of act on the part of *generable* and *corruptible* things: for they all have some kind of a limited form or act, which is able to be replaced by some other form; and the very phenomenon of change implies a privation, a negation, of the new form which is to be received.

But there is also another, more metaphysical type of privation, and therefore of participation, to be found in these same generable and corruptible beings: a metaphysical participation, a pure type of potency, a fundamental transcendent relationship which is found in every created being, whether

⁷ Cf. *In XII Metaph.*, lect. II, p. 624 (edit. Parma): "Licet.... materia prima sit in potentia ad omnes formas, tamen quodam ordine suscipit eas. Per prius enim est in potentia ad formas elementares, et eis mediantibus secundum diversas proportionibus commixtionum est in potentia ad diversas formas".

⁸ Cf. ARIST., *Physics*, VIII, 5, 257 b, 7-9: "The potential is in process to actuality and motion is an incomplete actuality of the movable....".

material or spiritual. As St. Thomas says, even in corporeal generation some deeper type of potency is necessary over and above matter:

Over and above this transitory mode of becoming, it behoves us — if we are to follow the opinion of Aristotle and Plato — to designate another, more fundamental type.... That is to say, over and above that mode of becoming by which something is generated when a new form is united to the matter — we must presuppose another, more fundamental generation of things, according to which existence itself is infused to the whole universe of creatures from that primary being who is existent of His very nature.⁹

This fundamental deprivation of existence *in itself*, which gives to a thing the metaphysical possibility for *receiving* existence *ab alio* — is called in Thomistic terminology, "essence". All existing creatures, in so far as they are created and participant, must have some a-temporal ground for receiving existence — a ground which becomes at the same time a mode of expressing existence. And "essence" supplies such a ground.

This essence, indeed, gives complete metaphysical shape, and possibility of existence, to a thing. And nothing would be able to exist, unless it had the intrinsic form of transcendent potentiality which its essence gives it. However, we must not make the mistake of supposing that essence actually causes the existence of something, instead of vice versa. Essence has no casual relationship to the existence it "receives," except a purely material one. In fact, as St. Thomas notes in the *De Ente et Essentia*,¹⁰ we can easily think of some essence without knowing anything about whether one actually exists, or not. This is because of our human, analytic habit of breaking things up into their intelligible parts, and then starting from the bottom, so to speak, in the didactical reconstructions which we make of reality. But our reconstructions will never represent an actual thing *in rerum natura*, unless there is a final mental addition of the *actus ultimus*, the form of forms and act of all acts, i. e., the act of existence itself, or *esse*.

In a composite essence, the matter is not existentially actuated by the form, except on condition that the form is itself made real and actual by the *actus essendi*. A similar relationship to the *actus essendi* is found in the case of angels, who, though they may be said to "be" their own form,¹¹ yet cannot be said to be their own existence. As St. Thomas states in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

We find in the angels a composition, in that their existence is not identical with their quiddity [*quod est*].... We have already shown that God is His own subsistent existence. Nothing, therefore, besides God, can be its own existence; it follows consequently, that in every created substance, the substance is one thing, while the existence of the substance is quite another.¹²

⁹ *De Subst. Sep.*, Ch. IX, 48: "Ultra hunc modum fieri necesse est secundum sententiam Platonis et Aristotelis ponere alium altiore.... Oportet.... supra modum fieri quo aliquid fit, forma materiae adveniente, praeintelligere aliam rerum originem, secundum quod esse attribuitur toti universitati rerum a primo ente quod est suum esse".

¹⁰ *De Ente et Essentia*, IV.

¹¹ *De Ente*, IV.

¹² *S. C. G.*, II, 52: "Invenitur in eis aliqua compositio, ex eo quod non est idem in eis esse et quod est.... Ostensum est quod Deus est suum esse subsistens. Nihil igitur aliud praeter Ipsum potest esse suum esse; oportet igitur in omni substantia quae est praeter Ipsum, aliud esse ipsam substantiam et aliud ejus esse".

However, in the angels, as well as in the most inferior material substance, the *actus essendi* is not self-sufficient; but must, for its explanation and very possibility, presuppose some type of "pure" potency, some "material" for the reception of the act.

And so we see that "potency" in its most abstract and essential sense is the material principle which makes finite existence itself possible. We shall see in the following section how it also corresponds in a derivative sense to other acts, or perfections, or aspects of perfections — than the *actus essendi* itself.

C. THE PRIMORDIAL TYPES OF POTENCY — ACTIVE AND PASSIVE POTENCY.

St. Thomas, in the beginning of his *De Potentia Dei*, differentiates for us the two fundamental divisions of potency:

There is a twofold division of potency: 1) active potency, which is the principle of that act which is called 'operation'; and 2) passive potency, which is the principle of the first act, or form, of a thing.¹³

St. Thomas goes on to say¹⁴ that active potency is the cause of all the "actions", or operations, which are elicited from an individual existent: and that passive potency is the cause of all the passivities and "passions" in a thing. He remarks that our notion of "potency" is derived from a consideration of act, and that we start out *in via inventionis* in ascribing potency to the most overt operations, and finally end up in positing it as the purely passive principle of the most convert "operation" — namely, of the form and substantial act of a thing (and thus this latter division of potency is truly, as we remarked above,¹⁵ potency in the most abstract and essential sense, potency *par excellence*).

An understanding of active and passive potency is of paramount importance for the whole of Thomistic ontology. The reason for this is that the relationship of active to passive potency within a particular being or between one being and another — serves to establish this or that individual being in its peculiar and proper analogical status, within the whole hierarchy of creation. And all the perfections of a particular being are proportionate to this ontological status within the realm of being.

Our next consideration, therefore, in this analysis of the general Thomistic formulation of the doctrine on potency, will be given to the precise scope and extent of these fundamental types of active and passive potency.

1) *The Scope and Existential Ramifications of "Active Potency"*.

The operations produced naturally by a being are called by St. Thomas the "act of that which is perfect", or the "act of a being in act".

¹³ *Loc. cit.*, 1, c: "Duplex est potentia: una activa cui respondet actus qui est operatio; alia est potentia passiva, cui respondet actus qui est forma".

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sect. B, ad fin.

For example, the operation by which a separate substance applies its will to various intelligible species would be such an "act of a being in act".¹⁶ This terminology is meant to differentiate such operations from mere transient motion, which is properly called the "act of being in potency", i. e., an act not flowing in the natural order from some state of actuality which a being already has, but infused into some "pure", i. e., completely passive, potency.¹⁷

The potencies which correspond to such operations, i. e., the "potencies of beings in act", are the so-called "active powers" of beings. In created beings, these active powers are characterized as accidental perfections, in the second species of the accident of quality: ontological qualities which effectively bridge the gap between a substance and its own operations.¹⁸ They must be attributed to all creatures, precisely because creatures are unable to act immediately through their substantial forms.¹⁹ (In God, on the other hand, who is able to act immediately through His simple and eternally active essence, active "power" becomes existentially identical with substantial act.).

While active potency in God is synonymous with the infusion of esse to all created potencies, and is, in its essence, a *fait accompli*, active potency in creatures is a means through which their perfection in accidental esse is accomplished — a principle discernible by the human mind in its efforts to accurately describe the process which must take place for the production of any concrete act.²⁰ We must presuppose some such principle within the individual, if we are to attribute a concrete action to an individual as to its source, i. e., its spontaneous initiator.²¹

The power of action within a creature would seem to be able to be best described as the ability of a thing to accomplish its natural or freely intended end with a minimum of hindrance or obstacles.²² For example, a powerful fighter would be able to obtain more by brute strength than another person.²³ But this power of action is neither self-sufficient nor self-explanatory. It must have a root, a rational ground, in the substantial act, in the form, of the individual creature.²⁴ As with every accident, it must be rooted in, and caused by, the *substance* of a thing.²⁵ And in the case of an intellectual creature, we would have to say that the root of all such powers is the incomplete substantiality of the soul as the active principle of the human essence²⁶ (or, in the case of separate substances, the materially unlimited and uncomposed substantiality of the separated form²⁷).

¹⁶ *S. Th.*, I, q. 59, art. 1, ad 3.

¹⁷ Cf. *In III Phys.*, Lect. III, init. It should be noted that, in Aristotle's formulation the form (first act) of a substance is also an "act of a being in potency", in that the generation of any substantial form is immediately reducible to the "primary" locomotion — i. e., the combination and separation of elemental particles. (Cf. *Phys.*, VIII, 7 260 a, 29-260 b, 14).

¹⁸ Cf. *De Pot.*, I, q. I, art. 1.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, ad. 11.

²⁰ *S. Th.*, I, q. 41, art. 6, ad 1.

²¹ *S. C. G.* II, 60: "Item. Sicut nihil....".

²² *In I Sent.*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *De Pot.*, art. I, c.

²⁵ *De Ente*, VI.

²⁶ *De Virtute in Comm.*, I, 4, ad 3.

²⁷ *De Subst. Sep.*, VIII, 45.

The form and substantial perfection of a thing might, therefore, be called its first and fundamental "principle of operations". However, since the acts which can be produced by substantial forms are manifold, and since there is a certain natural succession among the posited acts themselves, we are led to discern different types of active potencies as immediately responsible for different "species" of operations.

In the case of creatures, we examine the multiple operations of which they are capable, and the types of objects or concrete effects to which these operations must correspond or must be related; and we thus come to arrange the "active potencies" themselves in various genera and species. But in the case of God (in whom there can be no separation of operation and substance) we are led to posit active potency from a study of His effects only,²⁸ and not of His eternal operation. And from the knowledge of His unlimited effects and His universal providence, we rise to a rather tentative but nonetheless certain knowledge of His eternally-active omnipotence. The proximate rational ground for this attribution of active potency to God seems to be the principle that "there must be an active potency corresponding to every passive potency",²⁹ coupled with the realization that the whole universe of passive potencies, taken as a system, must correspond to some single, simple, and infinitely efficacious active potency.³⁰

While the omnipotence of God is intelligible to us only through consideration of the dependent potency of the universe taken as a whole, the active potency of creatures becomes intelligible to us through the various types of operations and movements which take place in and among them.

By consideration of the directly perceptible phenomenon of self-movement in living creatures, we easily arrive at the notion of the necessity for some active potential principle to supply the basis for such motions.

The least perfect type of such self-movement is the phenomenon of growth and alimentation which is perceptible in all corporeal living beings, and to which we ascribe the corresponding active potency of "vegetation".³¹ The most advanced expression of such self-motion is the phenomenon of self-locomotion, which we perceive in animals which do not have their food immediately present to them (i. e., through the soil, etc.);³² and we correspondingly ascribe the potency of "locomotion" as the principle of such advanced movements.³³

By consideration of other indirectly perceptible phenomena, we can also arrive at the notion of the existence of a purely immanent principle of activity, the active power of intellection. Our fundamental method in this case is the method of introspection. Using the data given to us through the common

²⁸ Cf. *S. Th.*, q. 25, art. 1.

²⁹ *S. C. G.*, II, 22: "omni potentia(e) passivae respondet potentia activa".

³⁰ Cf. *In I Sent.*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1.

³¹ Cf. *In II De Anima*, Lect. III, 256, 257; and *In I De Anima*, Lect. XIVM, 199.

³² Cf. *In VIII Phys.*, Lect. XV, ad fin. "Probat quod...."; also, *I De Virt. in Comm.*, art. III.

³³ Note that the potency of "locomotion" corresponds to a particular *genus of operation*, while the potency of "vegetation" expresses the common denominator "spontaneity" which is the *modus operandi* of all living things, qua living. Cf. *In I De Anima*, Lect. XIV, 199-201; and *In II De Anima*, Lect. VI, 300.

sense, imagination, and memory, and seeing by reflection the "peripheral" activities of the passive intellect in the operations of the imagination we are led to seek for the sufficient reason of all such interiorly motivated movements. And we find such a sufficient reason only by positing a faculty in man which, though dependent on external objects and external stimuli as conditions for the movements which it causes, nevertheless its essence is autonomous. And this is the faculty of intellect. In lieu of this faculty, we would be absolutely without sufficient reason for the phenomena of abstraction and conceptualization; for our experience shows that these latter operations are not directly proportionate to any external and material conditions which may give rise to them, but rather go *beyond* these conditions.

Finally, seeing that the intellect is essentially autonomous, and only connected *per accidens* with the various concomitant phenomena which take place in man along with the more essential operations of these faculties, we come to realize that such a faculty can, and indeed must, exist in a *pure* state in some type of being. That is to say, there must be some type of being, or group of beings, which understand without depending on external objects or being subject to temporal progression. For, as St. Thomas says, "whatever exists *per accidens* in any nature, is not found in all instances of that nature";³⁴ And he concludes that there must be some instance of the intellective nature in which intellection is found without the concomitant phenomena of abstraction, temporal progression, etc., for

in whatsoever genus is found an inferior exemplification of some perfection, there must be present, within that same genus, a specific type or instance of the pure and preminent exemplification of that perfection.³⁵

As the bed of an ocean is indisputably the *sine qua non* for all the fluctuations and alterations effected on its surface — so also passive potency is, in a very real way, the foundation for all the existential modifications which take place in, or through the agency of, a thing. Not only is passive potency directly responsible for all the "passivities" in a thing, i. e., for each and every way in which it is capable of receiving perfection: but it is also indirectly necessary as a substratum for active potencies, and all the operations to which these active potencies give rise. As St. Thomas says,

In a thing which possesses active potency in a dependent way, there must be presupposed some kind of passive potency to act as a receptacle for the active potency.³⁶

³⁴ Cf. *S. Th.*, q. 51, art. 1, c.: "Quod accidit alicui naturae, non invenitur universaliter in natura illa".

³⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*: "In quocumquo... genere invenitur aliquid imperfectum, oportet praeexistere aliquid perfectum in genere illo". It should be noted that in the foregoing arguments St. Thomas uses the words, "nature" and "genus" as if he considered "intellective" and "non-intellective" as the fundamental genera dividing up all of being: so that, in this usage "rational animal" would not only be a species of material being, but, in a broader sense, a subspecies of the species of "intellective being" which itself could be relegated to the broader genus of *potential*, or created being.

³⁶ *S. Th.*, Suppl. q. 35, a. 3 ad 1 (ref.: *In IV Sent.*, d. 7, q. 2, a. 1, q. a 3): "In eo qui habit potentiam activam ab altero, praeexigitur ad potentiam activam potentia passiva quae recipere possit potentiam activam".

It would be outside the scope of this paper to examine the nature of the proportion which exists between active and passive potency in separate substances. Suffice it to say here that there can be no active potency which is not grounded in some way in passive potency — which gives it the very possibility of existence.³⁷

If we prescind from the order of *metaphysical* existence, and confine ourselves to the sphere of physical and phenomenal change, we find the paragon of passive potencies in this sphere to be prime matter. For our criterion in evaluating passive potencies is the relative type and perfection of act to which they are related. And prime matter is ultimately the capacity to receive all material forms, all corporeally receptible acts, provided only the proper material conditions obtain:

Prime matter is in potency to all forms, but receives these forms only in a certain order: For before everything else it is in potency to the forms of the elements; and then, passing through this state, becomes potential to the various other forms, according to the dispositions and relative proportions of those elemental forms which it already has.³⁸

Prime matter is thus the most passive and potential entity in the physical sphere. However, if we look more closely at prime matter, we see that it is not pure passivity, pure potency. It is always part of a real, composite corporeal essence; and therefore cannot even be thought of in abstraction from its real corporeal existence. I cannot think of "prime matter", and at the same time entertain a doubt in my mind as to whether it has actual material existence; for by definition, prime matter is a principle of actual corporeal beings. The size and type of corporeal being makes no difference. As long as there is one corporeal being of any description, it would be meaningless to talk about a "purely possible" prime matter, and to ask whether this potency has "yet" been actuated.

However, if we transcend the physical realm of change and essential components, and pass to the sphere of metaphysical components, we find that we can ask such a question about the *essence*, taken as a whole. For example, as St. Thomas says in the *De Ente et Essentia*, Chapter IV, I can think of a "phoenix", without knowing whether one actually exists or not. I can abstract from the existence of an essence. The converse, of course, would not hold true: I could not consider "existence", and wonder whether it has been determined and made substantial. But such an abstraction *would* seem to be possible with regard to the essence.

Essence, then, is the most ultimate of potencies, in that it is precisely that potency which corresponds to existence itself, to the first and ultimate act of the whole being, to the very *act* of the form. The "essential" characteristic of essence is that it be receptive of existence. In material things it is also subject to change: but this is not due to essence *qua* potential, but essence *qua* material.

³⁷ Cf. *infra*, pp. 318-319.

³⁸ In *XII Metaph.*, Lect. II, p. 624 (edit. Parma): "Licet.... materia prima sit in potentia ad omnes formas, tamen quodam ordine suscipit eas. Per prius enim est in potentia ad formas elementares et eis mediantibus secundum diversas proportionales commixtionum est in potentia ad diversas formas".

Besides prime matter and essence, which are two facets of substantial passive potency, we can also distinguish various accidental passive potencies: To this category belong all those corporeal capacities or organs which render a corporeal being passive in the physical sense, i. e., capable of "further perfection". Thus the capacity of clay to take on new shapes, the capacity of the sense organs to receive concrete *intentiones*, the capacity of the sense appetites in man to be sublimated to the perfection of rational behavior through the *vis cogitativa*, would all be physical passive potencies. In addition to these physical passive potencies there are two instances of an accidental passive potency in the metaphysical order; namely, the possible intellect, which is potential to accidental existential perfection, but is situated outside the sphere of temporal change;³⁹ and the will, which, as the "intellective appetite",⁴⁰ is a "moved mover" directly under the jurisdiction of the "unmoved mover" among human faculties — the intellect.⁴¹

2) Comparison of Active with Passive Potency.

Although it is necessary to use the word "potency" with reference to both active and passive types because of their *de facto* mutual inseparability, nevertheless a certain ambiguity may result unless we clearly distinguish the precise way in which they are related to one another.

Active potency, in all its forms, seems always to presuppose some types of spontaneity, of self-motion, of self-determination.⁴² Passive potency, on the other hand, seems to be always conditioned from without.⁴³ All the various types of passive potency seem to be dependent on external agents or external conditions for their actuation or for their perpetuation in act. For example, the passive intellect in the sensible part of man's soul "lies in wait" for the intelligible form given from "above"; the slab of marble "lies in wait"

³⁹ Cf. *De Subst. Sep.*, XIX, 113.

⁴⁰ *S. Th.*, I, q. 81, a. 3, c.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, q. 80, a. 2, c. This seems offhand to contradict St. Thomas' thesis that the operation of the will is the "act of a being in act" (*S. Th.*, I, q. 59, art. 1, ad 3). But the contradiction disappears, if we consider the will with regard to the various domains which it affects or is affected by: In the domain of execution, the will is an active potency. In the domain of specification, however, the will is a passive potency; passive, that is, to the reception of ideas of goodness, or right and wrong, etc. from the intellect.

St. Thomas could not, however, denominate these two aspects an "agent will" and a "possible will" — setting up a parallel with the case of the intellect. For the will is only active with regard to human activity, only passive with regard to the intellect. It is not a self contained totum of passivity/activity, as is the intellect.

⁴² The "power" of an impermeable metal to withstand any hindrance or obstacle, which St. Thomas refers to in *In I Sent.*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1, would seem to be reducible to an accidental form consequent on particular matter (cf., e. g., *De Ente et Essentia*, 6, where St. Thomas speaks of such forms).

⁴³ For example, among the intellective powers the will, although it seems to possess a certain spontaneity with regard to external effects, control of bodily movements, etc., is "passive" in its own context, the context of spiritual potencies — since it must always be determined by the species of the possible intellect. Thus among the intellective powers there is only one "active" potency — the agent intellect which functions as an unmoved mover, as it were, in the realm of concepts and volition.

for the form which the sculptor is to give it. And ultimately, all that is material or potential is dependent on the active power of God, which either perfects or sustains it, both directly and through the agency of secondary causes.

D. SUBDIVISION OF ACTIVE AND PASSIVE POTENCY.

To conclude our discussion of these fundamental active and passive types of potency, let us examine some of the subtypes or aspects of potency, which St. Thomas mentions explicitly or implicitly, and which can be categorized, respectively, on the basis of their operative (active) or receptive (passive) orientation.

1) *Subdivisions of Active Potency.*

a) *Universal potency* may be ascribed to all those active potencies which are of higher, i. e. more eminent, gradation in the hierarchy of potential beings. Thus the angelic intelligence extends to all the objects which inferior intelligences encompass in their scope; and the active potency of God extends to all of creation, continually actuating it and conserving it in being.⁴⁴

b) *Exemplary potency* is the power of some ideal prototype to serve as a model after which other things are subsequently or consequently fashioned. For example, an artifact is subsequent to an exemplar idea in the artist's mind; and every created perfection is consequent upon the consummate perfection of the Divine Word, which it mirrors in some finite way.⁴⁵

c) *Absolute potency* is the active creative power of God, considered in precision from His will and wisdom,⁴⁶ insofar as it is absolutely capable of creating anything which is not self-contradictory, e. g. a winged horse.

d) *Ordered potency*, on the other hand, is this same creative power of God, considered in its *de facto* union and identity with His will and wisdom.⁴⁷

e) *Natural potency* is the self-sufficiency of natural powers to perform certain operations, without any special assistance in the supernatural order.⁴⁸ For example, the agent intellect of man is self-sufficient to lead him to knowledge in the light of first principles.

2) *Subdivisions of Passive Potency.*

a) *Subjective potency* is the capacity of an actually constituted substance to be perfected and completed by its accidents; for any such substance, considered as a subject or substratum for accidents, is related to its accidents as potency to act.⁴⁹ This is not to say that there is any temporal sequence in

⁴⁴ *S. Th.*, I, q. 57, art. 2.

⁴⁵ Cf. *In I Sent.*, d. 42, q. 2, a. 1.

⁴⁶ *S. Th.*, I, q. 25, art. 5, ad 1.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, III, q. 1, art. 3, ad 3.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, I, q. 3, art. 6, c.

the perfection of a substance through its accidents: but only that the accidents of a being express fully those perfections which exist in only a "seminal" way in the substance. In the case of a man who becomes a doctor, for example, the new perfection which accrues to him is a result of the natural fulfillment of some capacity present in his particular essence: the progressions of time which takes place in the attainment of this perfection is only due to the exigencies of human nature, which requires a temporal unfolding of the material principle, for its perfection. In the angels, the full perfection of all "true" accidents (i. e., those which are predicable *simpliciter*) would seem to have taken place immediately (i. e., aeviternally) with their reception of their substantial *esse*.⁵⁰

b) "*Obediential potency*" is a strictly theological term used to designate the capacity of creatures to be "raised above themselves" through the operations of divine grace.

c) "*Positive*" *potency*⁵¹ is a term we might use to distinguish that material principle which, St. Thomas tells us, causes the existence of a thing by simply supplying a substratum for the form of that thing — as the mother supplies the raw material out of which a human being is generated.⁵² As applied to the sphere of strictly immaterial beings, the analogical "material" principle would be the essence, which is potential to the reception of *esse*.⁵³

d) "*Negative*" *potency*, on the other hand, might be used to designate the privation of other forms, which is caused by the coadaptation of the material principle to the single form which it has. This privation causes a corresponding appetite or tendency in the material principle, to pursue other forms, which it does not have.⁵⁴ In the angels, who are immaterial and unchangeable essences, the analogous privation would not seem to be any dynamic principle of change, but simply of static non-identity;⁵⁵ and there would be no corresponding natural appetite to possess all forms physically, but only the appetite to be united to all things intentionally, i. e., through knowledge. It seems to be of potency in this negative or privative sense that St. Thomas is speaking when he says, in the *De Ente et Essentia*,⁵⁶ that, as we move up the hierarchy of creatures, the superior beings have *more* act but *less* potency. For any increase in actuality implies a proportional diminution of limitations and privations.

⁵⁰ Although we can mentally distinguish a certain succession of natural and supernatural beatitude, etc., this is not a temporal succession. Cf. *S. Th.*, q. 62, art. 5, c and ad 2.

⁵¹ Although St. Thomas does not use the adjective, "positive" and "negative", as applied to potency, he does refer to potency-as-capacity in a twofold sense: sometimes in such a way as to emphasize that it is a capacity for some actuation, sometimes in such a way as to call attention to the fact that every actuated or fulfilled capacity excludes, of its very nature, certain privations (although it leaves room for other privations, i. e., other capacities-for). In order to present the notion of potency-as-capacity with optimum clarity, it would seem useful to make explicit the distinction between these two aforesaid aspects.

⁵² *In I Phys.*, Lect. XV; "probat quod....".

⁵³ *De Subst. Sep.*, VIII, 44.

⁵⁴ *In I Phys.*, Lect. XV; "Ostendit idem....".

⁵⁵ Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* (Tome 2, p. 101): "Tot sunt praesentiae, quot formae praesentes, et similiter tot carentiae seu absentiae et privationes, quot formae absentes".

⁵⁶ *De Ente et Essentia*, IV.

Having completed the differentiation of potency according to the main senses in which it seems to be used by St. Thomas, we might note that all the above-mentioned sub-types and aspects of potency are applicable to separate substances; with the exception of Absolute and Ordered potency, which seem to be strictly applicable only to God; and perhaps also of Exemplary potency (St. Thomas seems to indicate that this latter is not attributable to separate substances *simpliciter*).⁵⁷

We should also note that, when it comes to the question of actually applying the "active" and "passive" categories to concrete cases, a certain relativity obtains. For example, substantial form is passive to the reception of esse, but active in relation to prime matter; the agent intellect is "active" with regard to all other human faculties, but passive with regard to the illumination of faith, which requires an "obediential" capacity of the intellect as its prerequisite. But the cognition of these relativities is facilitated if one understands the fundamental distinction of active from passive potency — to which all other distinctions are subordinated — and which is itself the fundamental "relativity".

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⁵⁷ *S. Th.*, I, q. 55, a. 3, ad 1.